

9

MANTRAS FOR “EVERY GOD AND GODDESS”

Vernacular Religious Ritual in the Literature of Sabhapati Swami

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There is an important feature of yogic literature that has received no scholarly treatment to date, namely the incorporation of a wide variety of mantras for a range of gods, goddesses, and planetary deities in the Tamil vernacular literature of Sabhapati Swami (ca. 1828–1923/4), a nineteenth- to twentieth-century Tamil yogin with ties to the esoteric milieus of his time. Modern yoga in South Asia from the colonial period onward is often perceived to depart from its historical connection with the formalities of vernacular ritual in many contexts, a perception partly due to Swami Vivekananda’s modernization of yogic teachings, the efforts of the Theosophical Society, and later an emphasis on physical body culture and exercise (Singleton 2010, De Michelis 2008). Nevertheless, a wide variety of ritual forms remained popular in vernacular contexts of yoga that predated and were contemporary with this modernization. I present here an alternative story that shows how yoga in the Tamil vernacular context of Sabhapati Swami’s literature maintained an intrinsic connection with not only mantras but also an accompanying ritual apparatus that was deeply intertwined with festival traditions connected at shrines for the Tamil Siddhars and so-called “Swamigals.”

For the past century, Sabhapati Swami has remained a largely forgotten yet enigmatic figure, not only in the fields of yoga studies but also in esotericism, a field that has its own contours and links to alternative religious movements originating both in and outside of Europe (Cantú 2020, 2021; Asprem and Strube 2020; Hanegraaf 2015). Born in Velachery, then a small temple village south of colonial Madras, present-day Chennai, Sabhapati was educated at a Scottish missionary school in his early childhood yet remained deeply connected to Śaiva temple culture via his family’s service to Velachery Chidambara Swamigal (Vēta-cirēṇi Citambara [Periya] Cuvāmikaḷ, d. 1858), a Tamil Vīraśaiva guru in the line of Kumara Devar (Kumāratēvar) (Cuvāmikaḷ 2014, Cantú 2023). His three surviving hagiographical accounts state that he had a vision of the transcendent

Śiva (*civam*) who guided him to travel to the Pothigai Hills, a mountain range on the border with what was then Travancore (modern Kerala), specifically to the hermitage of Agastya, a legendary amalgamation of the Vedic rishi and founder of the Tamil Siddhars, who were revered as poets, alchemists, and yogins (Zvelebil 1992, Appendix 3; Venkatraman 1990). While it is difficult to account for what transpired at this hermitage, it is clear that he engaged with a network of yogins who were interested in revitalizing earlier traditions of the medieval Tamil Siddhars (Tam. *cittar*, < Skt. *siddha*),¹ a group that gradually, by Sabhapati’s time, were better known as Swamigals (*cuvāmikaḷ*, < *svāmin* + Tamil plural/honorific suffix *kaḷ*) on account of their connection to Tamil Vīraśaiva movements.² The hagiographies of Sabhapati Swami—or Sabhapati Swamigal (Capāpati Cuvāmikaḷ) as he was known by Tamils—claim that his new guru, a semi-legendary and centuries-old figure named Shivajnanabodha Rishi (Civañāṇ apota Ruṣi, < Śivajñānabodha Rṣi), instructed him to take his message to the rest of South Asia. While it is unclear just how many temple complexes he actually visited in North India, we know that by 1879 and 1880 ~~ee~~ he was spending his time between the Kangra Valley of Himachal Pradesh and Lahore in the British Punjab (now in Pakistan). In Lahore, he met with Shrish Chandra Vasu (Śrīś Candra Basu, 1861–1918), then a Bengali student at Government College Lahore and budding legal advocate whose father had migrated to the Punjab from what is today Bangladesh. Shrish Chandra edited and helped to publish the first edition of Sabhapati’s lectures, by that time a common format for presenting material by traveling speakers of reform movements (Jones 1976). Shrish Chandra published these lectures, predating Swami Vivekananda’s own published lectures on Rājayoga by over fifteen years, along with extra material (Swami 1880), and he was also involved in its Bengali translation. He likely helped Sabhapati arrange ~~a~~ meeting with the founders of the Theosophical Society, namely Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry S. Olcott (1832–1907), who remained friendly but ultimately very distant on account of their disbelief (at least publicly) over Sabhapati’s claim to have physically flown to the semi-legendary Mount Kailasa (Cantú 2021, Baier 2016).

Sabhapati became largely forgotten by the Theosophical Society, and his relationship with Shrish Chandra Vasu appears to have gradually faded by the end of the nineteenth century, yet he did not disappear from the historical record. Sabhapati instead turned his attention more directly to the temple culture of Tamil vernacular ritual practice, especially the use of mantras, or sacred formulae. By “vernacular” I mean customs popularly accessible and open to members of all castes, often connected with natural environments, landscapes, and things (e.g. stone, metal, water, flowers, and leaves), and grounded in religious customs and traditions as accessible through a local language. This accords with the notion of religious folklife as popular culture, which is arguably “an extension of or development from the older traditional forms of culture” (Yoder 1990), and are forms that are re-processed via new forms of media and in a language that the majority of the population could understand. My use of adjectives like “folk” or

“popular” or “vernacular” as such are ultimately predicated on language, that is, a common language of the people. While Sanskrit (often verging into a late form of the Tamil-Sanskrit hybrid language *maṇippiravāḷam*, < Skt *maṇipravāḷa*, “pearl and coral”) provided the linguistic foundation for most of Sabhapati’s religious teachings from the outset, it is clear from his works on mantra for Tamil audiences that he gradually began to much more consciously employ vernacular language in his guidance on holidays and the rituals surrounding local religious festivals. As a result, his later works came to reflect a fluid interface between both Sanskrit and Tamil vernacular religious worlds. Using the adjective “vernacular” with regard to Tamil is less problematic since it continues as a spoken language of the people, despite its rich classical history, but the Sanskrit vernacular remains less understood. In this context, it refers to the ways in which Sanskrit terms were rendered popularly accessible via the Tamil script as verbal forms, philosophical concepts, and mantras.

The best example of this interface is Sabhapati’s four-part pamphlet *Cakalākama tirattu* (“A Compilation of All Āgamas”), the first part of which was published in 1894. This work presents Hindu ritual observances of a wide array of holidays assigned to Tamil months (Yōkīśvarar 1894). These include annual celebrations and astrological events, most of which are celebrations intended for the general public, in this case Tamil speakers since the work is in Tamil with essentially no English. It is a valuable record of what kinds of rituals were taking place on a regular basis at the Konnur “Meditation Hall,” which is Sabhapati’s own English translation for the *maṭālayam* (< Skt. *maṭha* + *ālaya*) that he established between Konnur and Villivakkam, villages to the west of Madras, after returning there in the 1890s. These celebrations included prominent observances like Shivaratri (*civārāttiri viratam*, < Skt. *śivarātri*) and Vinayaga/Ganesh Chaturthi (Tamil *viṇāyakacaturthi*, < Skt. *vināyakacaturthī*),³ but also relatively less-common festivals and local observances that may reflect Sabhapati’s travels outside South India (e.g. “Dol” or “the Observance of Lord Kedar”).⁴ The full list is as follows, imparting an impression of the contents and connection with Tamil vernacular religion:

- 1 “Monthly worship rites to be carried out at shrines to Śiva” (*civālaya mātapūjai*, < Skt. *śivālaya mātapūjā*)
- 2 “The Observance of Vinayagar’s Chaturthi” (*viṇāyaka caturtti viratam*, < Skt. *vināyaka caturthī vrata*)
- 3 “The chaturthi observance for [removing] difficulties” (*caṅkaṭa caturtti viratam*, < Skt. *saṅkaṭa caturthī vrata*)
- 4 “Arudra Darisanam,” lit. “Vision of Ārdrā [Nakṣatrā]” (*āruttirā taricaṇam*, < Skt. *ārdrā darśana*)
- 5 “The (winter) solstice” (*caṅkirānti*, < Skt. *saṅkrānti*)
- 6 “Dol, or the Festival of the Holy Swing” (*ṭōḷ allatu tiruvūcaluḥcavam*)
- 7 “Diwali (Narak Chaturdashi)” (*tīpāvali (narakkā caturttaci)*, < Skt. *dīpāvali (naraka caturdaśī)*)

- 8 “The Observance of Lord Kedar [of Kedārnāth tīrtha]” (*kētārīśvarar viratam*, < Skt. *kedārīśvara vrata*)
- 9 “Rules for the Lamp of the Lunar Asterism of Krittika [Dīwālī or Dīpāvalī]” (*kārttikai nakṣattira tīpaviti*, < Skt. *kṛttikā nakṣatra dīpavidhī*)
- 10 “The Instrument of Pradosham” (Mpv1. *piratōṣakāraṇam*, < Skt. *pradoṣakāraṇa*)
- 11 “The Observance of Monday [in the month of Karthika]” (*cōmavāra viratam*, < Skt. *somavāra vrata*)
- 12 “The Festival of the Float” (*teppōrcavam*)
- 13 “Worship rites for the Vision of the Bliss of the Supreme Śakti” (*parācatti ānanta taricaṇap pūjai*, < Skt. *parāśakti ānanda darśana pūjā*)
- 14 “The Observance of the Friday of Vinayagar (*vināyaka cuṅkiravāra viratam*, < Skt. *vināyaka śukravāra vrata*)
- 15 “The Observance of Vinayagar’s Shasthi”⁵ (*vināyakacaṣṭi viratam*, < Skt. *vināyakacaṣṭhī vrata*)
- 16 “The Observance of Angaraka’s Chaturthi” (*aṅkārakacaturtti viratam*, < Skt. *aṅgārakacaturthī vrata*)
- 17 “The Observance of the Friday of Subramaniam” (*cuppirāṇiyar cuṅkiravāravir-
ratam*, < Skt. *subrahmaṇya śukravāravrata*)
- 18 “The Observance of Skanda’s Shasthi [sister or bride]” (*skantacaṣṭi viratam*, < Skt. *skandaṣṭhī vrata*)⁶
- 19 “The Observance of the Krittika [Nakshatra]” (*kiruttikai viratam*, < Skt. *kṛt-
tikā vrata*)
- 20 “The Observance of the Thiruvathira [Nakshatra]” (*tiruvātirai viratam*, < Skt. *śrī ārdrā vrata*)
- 21 “The Great Festival of the Five Actions” (*pañcakiruttiya makōrcavam*, < Skt. *pañcakṛtya mahotsava*)⁷
- 22 “The Observance of Umamaheswara” (*umāmakēśvara viratam*, < Skt. *umāma-
heśvara vrata*)
- 23 “The Night of Shiva” (*civarāttiri viratam*, < Skt. *śivarātri*)

This legacy of festival observances has survived to the present. The current “Shrine of Sri Sabhapati Swami and Ananda Ananda Swami” (Śrī Capāpati Cuvāmi maṇṇum Āṇantā Āṇanta Cuvāmikaḷiṇ Cannitāṇam) on Red Hills Road in Villivakkam regularly holds religious festivals advertised via WhatsApp and Telegram, events that are often combined with folk dancing and music. One of the most regular of these, which was also practiced in Sri Sabhapati Swami’s time according to *Cakalākama tīraṭṭu*, is a Tamil-specific “evening worship” (*piratōṣam*, < Skt. *pradoṣa*) on auspicious nights for Śiva (often held bimonthly on the thirteenth day of the lunar fortnight), connected with the myth of the churning of the ocean of milk (see Figure 9.1).

The festivals presented by Sabhapati in his pamphlets were not only to be observed in a highly organized fashion on specific days of the year, but they also were connected to an elaborate system of mantras, in this context Sanskrit sacred utterances in both the Tamil and Devanagari scripts, to be recited every



FIGURE 9.1 A pamphlet in Tamil on *piratōṣam* (< Skt. *pradoṣa*) in the collection of the Shrine of Sri Sabhapati Swami and Ananda Ananda Swami in Villivakkam. Photo by Keith E. Cantú.

day. In other words, the ritual attitudes cultivated on non-festival days (i.e. in daily ritual practice) inform these special observances, even those that are connected to dance, music, and ritual. The demand for further guidance on these proper ritual attitudes and associated mantras is reflected in another of Sabhapati's pamphlets published four years later and entitled *Cātaṇṇappiyāsāṇupava upatēcam* (< Skt. *Sādhanaḥbhyāsānubhava upadeśa*, "Guidance on the Exercises and Practices of the Rites," Svāmikaḷ 1898). This work, published in Vellore, a city west of Chennai, included such topics as "Guidance on the Order of Ceremonies that Must Be Carried Out in the Morning" (*kālaiyil ceyyavēṇṭiya aṇuṣṭāṇaviti upatēcam*), "Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava Assignments of the Limbs and Assignments of the Arms"

(*caiva vaiṣṇava añkarnniyācam*, *karnniyācam*), “Meditation on the Recitation of the Gāyatri [Mantra]” (*kāyattiri jepattiyāṇam*), “Guidance on the Mantras for Recitation of Every Deity” (*carvatēvatā jepamantirañkaḷiṇ upatēcam*), and “Guidance on the Sacrifice and Meditation of the Nine Celestial Bodies” (*navakkirakattiyāṇam yākam upatēcam*). This latter guidance on the nine celestial bodies (< Skt. *navagraha*) reflects engagement with a specific folk ritual practice, prominent in a wide variety of local Tamil temples, of circumambulating stone fixtures of the celestial bodies clockwise so as to remove astrological defects (*doṣas*) that affect one’s potential for success in life (see Figure 9.2).

Emphasis on mantra as central to religious practice and the observance of popular festivals is not in and of itself a marker of vernacular religion; such an emphasis will also readily be found in Hindu elite temple contexts across South Asia. However, Sabhapati’s emphasis is unique, for he imbued his pan-Indian teachings on mantra with what I would call a distinctly Tamil vernacular “flavor.” This flavor is reflected in at least three qualities that distinguish his teachings from the way mantras were presented to audiences in North India. First, his entire system is framed in the yogic mythology of Agastya, who as stated above was a Vedic rishi whose eponymous mountain is on the border between Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and who is considered the legendary founder of the



FIGURE 9.2 A stone installation of the nine celestial bodies at Sri Devi Ellaman Thirukoil (Śrī Tēvi Ellammaṇ Tirukkōvil) in Adyar, Chennai, just south on Damodharapuram Main Road from the headquarters of Theosophical Society. Photo by Keith E. Cantú.

community of Tamil Siddhars, yogins, physicians, and alchemists whose tumuli (*jīvacamāti*, < Skt. *jīvasamādhī*, although the compound appears to be unattested in Sanskrit sources) are scattered across South India. Second, the mantras were published in the vernacular script of Tamil with explanatory notes for Sanskrit terms, allowing his teachings to be widely understood by his local audience. Third, the mantras connect with musical tones (*svaras*) to make their recitation popularly accessible, inviting local participation and intersecting with the world of Tamil devotional music.

The first two of the above three qualities, as well as Sabhapati's elaborate system of mantras as a whole, is most clearly articulated in his second book-length Tamil work (Cuvāmikaḷ 1913), the all-too-extended title of which was *Carva māṇaca nittiya karmānuṣṭāṇa, carva tēvatātēvi māṇaca pūjāttiyāṇa, pīrammakāṇa rājayōka niṣtai camāti, carva tīkṣākramattiyāṇa, cātaṇṇa appiyāca kīramāṇucantāṇa, caṅkīraha vēta tiyāṇōpatēca smiruti* ("Inspired Treatise on the Instructions of Meditation, as Compiled from the Scriptures, on Every Mental Ceremony to be Performed Daily, on a Mental Ritual Meditation for Every God and Goddess, on the Steadfast Composition in the Yoga of Kings that is the Gnosis of Brahman, on Every Meditation on the Sequences of Initiation, and on an Inquiry into the Sequence of the Practice of the Rites"). Amid this lengthy title is also found an important claim: there are mantras and meditations for "every god and goddess" (*carva tēvatātēvi*, < Skt. *sarva devatādevī*). Sabhapati may have known this is an exaggeration as some local Tamil deities seem to be missing (e.g. Ellaman or Karuppu Sami), or the claim could relate to his philosophy that these gods and goddesses are found within various parts of the yogic body and/or are all part of a transcendent Sarveśvarar or "God of All." In any case, the main work was published by the Office of Shanmuga Vilasa Press (Ṣaṇmuka Vilāsa Piras Āpic) in the Puttur (Puttūr) area of Tiruchirappalli (formerly Trichy), today an important metropolis in Tamil Nadu, with portions also published by "Sivarahasyam Press, P. T." in Madras; little is known about either publishers. The work was registered with the Madras Record Office, in which the catalog entry is shortened to "Mantira Sangraha Veda Dyanopadesa Smriti," an Anglicization of *Mantira caṅkīraha vēta tiyāṇōpatēca smiruti*; the head word being the Tamil word mantra (*mantiram*) stresses its main feature as a work on mantra. The scope of the work is large and contains mantras to an entire pantheon of gods and goddesses as well as instructions in both Tamil and English on Śivarājayoga (see Cantú [forthcoming](#)).

This work also contains a diagram, even a map of sorts, depicting Agastya, Sabhapati's semi-legendary guru Shivajnanabodha, and Sabhapati himself with the title Guru Father Rishi (see Figure 9.3). The diagram is appropriately titled "the diagram of the tradition of succession between guru and student on the mountain called Mount Agastya, the Southern Kailasa" (*taḱṣaṇakailāca akas-tiyācala parvata kuruciṣya pāramparaiya paṭam*). The three yogins are depicted meditating in caves (Mpv. *kukaikaḷ*, < Skt. *guhā*) at the confluence of the Thami-rabirani River and two other (possibly legendary or "yogic") rivers, the Amrita

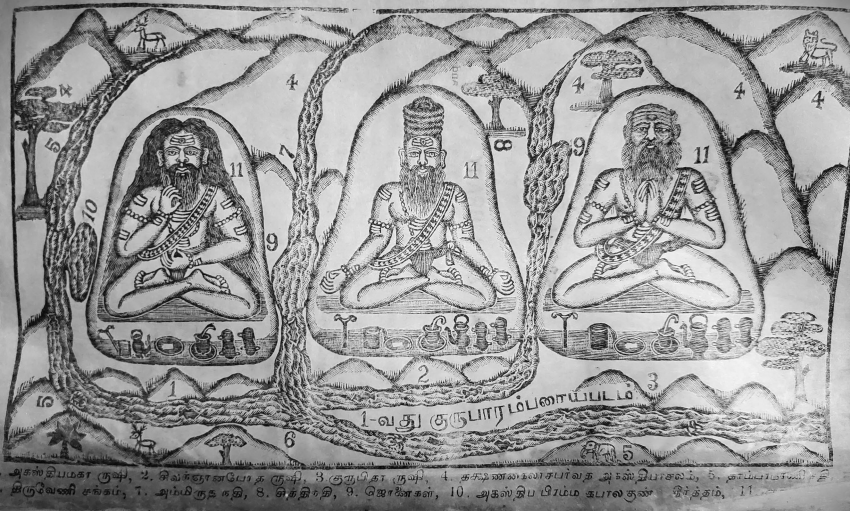


FIGURE 9.3 “The diagram of the tradition of succession between guru and student on the mountain called Mount Agastya, the Southern Kailasa.” Agastya is pictured on the left, Shivajnana Bodha Rishi in the center, and Guru Father Rishi (Sabhapati Swami) on the right. Diagram published in Cuvāmikaḷ 1913.

River (Mpv. *amirutanati*) and the Siddhi River (Mpv. *cittinati*). These form a “triple-braided” (Skt. *trivenī*) confluence that mirrors the famous confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna, and (subterranean) Saraswati in present-day Prayagraj.

Recurrent references to Agastya are perhaps Sabhapati’s most explicit link to Tamil vernacular religion, given Agastya’s direct connection to the Siddhars. In the early twentieth century, the rishi also played an important role in the Dravidian language movement as the legendary founder of the Tamil language (Weiss 2009). Sabhapati was writing before this movement gained momentum, and as a result was probably more interested in using the symbolic capital of Agastya’s power and authority as a primal guru (*ātikuru*, < Skt. *ādiguru*) of yoga.⁸ The text asserts itself to be “a scripture on the mantra of Agastya’s hidden guidance” (*akastiyar kuptōpatēca mantira vētameṇal*). As with many of these sections of “guidance” (*upatēcam*, < Skt. *upadeśa*), the actual content of this section consists only of the following prose poem (Cuvāmikaḷ 1913, 3):

Listen, O world! Listen, even if you won’t listen. The giver of liberation and individuated bliss (*muktikaivalliyam*), the great and undying Agastya Rishi [pronounced] the truth and mystery of the scriptures as a hidden instruction. How much has this man been gracious unto me, he who is called the blessed Shivajnana Bodha Rishi? Have I not pronounced these also daily as the instructions of this compiled scripture, O expanse of the world?⁹

This poem firmly grounds the rationale for the use of mantras in this entire “compiled scripture” on mantra in the Tamil vernacular mythology of Agastya and Sabhapati Swami’s semi-legendary guru Shivajnanabodha Rishi. The importance of Agastya was also reflected in Sabhapati’s publication of a lost work entitled *Aṭukkunilai pōtam*, “The Order of the State of Awakening,” a series of verses attributed to Agastya that appear to derive from extant manuscripts known by the same title.

Agastya also figures prominently in Sabhapati Swami’s Tamil-language hagiography, composed by Shivajnanaprakash Yogishwara (Civakñāṇappirakā-cayōkīśvara, dates unknown), and also appears in his English-language works. One legend asserts that Agastya is still living and appears once in every fifty years, and a second legend refers to Agastya founding a temple that Sabhapati frequented before establishing his meditation hall (Cuvāmikaḷ 1913, 13 [of hagiography section]):

He then approached the city of Chennai and is in Holy Konnur in Villivakkam. In ancient times Agastya established a pilgrimage bathing site of Agastya and a temple of Agastya at a forest of bael trees (*vilvavaṇam*, < Skt. *bilvavana*) where he slew the asuras Vatapi and Ilvala. He instituted a large pool, called the Offering Pool (Yākakuṇṭam, < Skt. *yājñakuṇḍa*), and made an offering (*yākam*, < Skt. *yājña*) upon coming to Holy Konnur. He approached the large pool, and was in his gnostic vision of the past, present, and future (Mpv1. *trikāla ṇāṇatiruṣṭi*, < Skt. *trikālaṇṇānadrṣṭi*) while on the ground in steadfast devotion. While in his steadfast devotion, he also established a hermitage and abode of instruction (*maṭṭālayam*, < Skt. *maṭhālaya*) after a short time. He dwelled there in that place and made offerings at the great lake called the Offering Pool. On the ground at the north side of this Pool of Offering was where the Lord of All (Carvēśvara, < Skt. *Sarveśvara*) had given the vision of his dance (*naṭaṇam*, < Skt. *naṭana*) of five activities (Mpv1. *pañcakiruttiam*, < Skt. *pañcakṛtya*) to Agastya, and where his disciples had gone to perform worship rites to 1,008 lingas and 108 shaligrams.¹⁰

Holy Konnur (Tirukoṇṇūr, also just Konnur or Connoor) was a village in the Saidapet Taluk of Chingleput District that today has been almost entirely subsumed within the northwest Chennai suburb of Villivakkam (Villivākkam); a Vijayanagara-era temple called Arulmigu Agatheeswarar Temple (Arulmiku Akastīśvarar Tirukkōyil) still exists at the site. A published pamphlet about this sacred site (*talam*, < Skt. *sthala*) in Tamil, entitled *Vilvāraṇyat tala purāṇac curukam* (“Summary of the Legend of the Sacred Site of the Bael Forest”), refers to both the bael forest and to the same destruction of Vatapi and Ilvala by Agastya in Villivakkam (Tāsar 2000, see Figure 9.4). The earliest known mention of this story appears to be in the third book (Skt. *parvan*) of the Mahābhārata epic, entitled the “Āraṇyakaparvan,” chapter 99 according to Sørensen’s order (1904, 237, 720) and chapter 97 according to Sukthankar’s numbering of the *parvan*



FIGURE 9.4 *Vilvāraṇyaṭ tala purāṇaṣṣuṟukkaṁ* (“Summary of the Legend of the Sacred Site of the Bael Forest”). I am grateful to Chitra Selvakumar for mailing me a copy of this work after we met at the temple in February 2020.

(Sukthankar 1942, 339–341; see also Zvelebil 1992, 238 and Appendix 3). The prominence of the story of Agastya’s ingestion of the two “demon” (Skt. *daitya* or *āśura*) brothers Ilvalan and Vātāpi—the latter of whom even has an ancient temple site named after him in Badami, Karnataka—provides a compelling example how the Sanskrit mythos of Agastya became intertwined with Tamil and other South Indian vernacular legends, including a temple named after him in Konnur (Figure 9.5).

Sabhapati’s literature is not just connected to the Tamil legends of Agastya, but also employs vernacular languages and scripts. Throughout his Tamil works are found mantric formulae and instructions for their application, all in the Tamil script, just as his (heavily Sanskritic) Hindi and Telugu works and Bengali translation—not fully considered in this chapter for the sake of space—contain instructions in the Devanagari, Telugu, and Bengali scripts, respectively. The Sanskrit rendered in these scripts would not always have been understood to his



FIGURE 9.5 A line of *śivalingas* worshipped with flowers along the outer courtyard of the Arulmigu Agatheeswarar Temple. Photo by Keith E. Cantú.

audience, so Sanskrit terms are often accompanied by additional notes to explain or clarify meaning in vernacular languages (see, for example, Figure 9.6). While there is certainly a rich tradition of interpreting Sanskrit terms in manuscript commentarial traditions and vernacular translations from Sanskrit, the presence of a list of terms giving Tamil equivalents for Sanskrit terms was very rare at this time for a non-academic published work. This concern to “localize” teachings and make them accessible to various regions of India, in other words, opened the door for Sabhapati to willingly blend his Sanskrit-based teachings on yoga and mantra with vernacular religious worlds. Such a phenomenon of localization to fit a given vernacular-language audience can be usefully contrasted with Sanskritization as a means to make a local text intelligible to an educated audience all across South Asia.

Sabhapati’s Tamil works contain vernacular instructions for how these mantras are to be used in the observation of rituals (Cuvāmikaḷ 1913, 4):

It is necessary to meditate according to the summary of this teaching, and this is the sequence: having recited the mantra for bathing in the morning and taken a bath, sit in a solitary place. While reciting the rules for the sequence of daily ceremonies *with* your mouth, at that time also meditate with your mind. This should start at six o’clock in the morning and

இந்த சங்கீரஷ ஸேதந்தின் சமுஸ்கிருத பதங்களினுடைய தமிழ் அர்த்தங்கள்.	
சுருஷ்வதியே—செய்தேன்	சோடசகலா—பதினாறு கலைகள்
மமேவ—என்னுடைய	ஸோ—அதுவாயிருப்பதே
நசி—நசிக்கக்கூடவது	அஹம்—நான்
மசி—மசிக்கக்கூடவது	மேவ—அந்தப்படிக்கே or எதார்த்தமாக
சுவாமி—சித்தியாகக்கூடவது	ஸயம்—கலக்கிறது
சுவமேவ—உன்னுடைய	ஸிக்கியம்—ஒன்றாகிறது
சுவாரே—மார்க்கமாய்	ஆகாரமாய்—அந்தமயமாய்
சுவாரா—மார்க்கத்தால்	ஐக்ஞேயவத்திரம்—பூதால்
தேஹி—கொடு	ஐக்ஞம்—அக்னிஞண்டம்
குரு—செய்	தேஹம்—சரீரம்
பிரம்மரந்திரம்—கபாலமத்தியம்	யந்தாக்தம்—உள்ளே
ஆசமன்னியம்—ஜலங்குடிக்கிறது	யந்திரே—உள்ளே
புரோக்யணை—ஜலத்தால் தெளித்தல்	மேருதண்டி—முதுகுநாடி
அர்க்கியம்—ஜலத்தால் கைகழுவல்	வீணாதண்டி
பாத்ஜியம்—கால் கழுவல்	ஸ்திதி—ரக்ஷண
ஆசமன்னியம்—வாய் கழுவல்	ஸ்திதம்—ஸ்திரமாயிருக்கிறது
ஹம்—நான்	இருத்தியம்—கிரியை
ஸஃ ஸா—அது	குத்திரம்—தால்
அங்குஷ்டம்—பெரியவிரல்	பிதர்—இரந்துபேணவர்கள்
நாஜனீ—இரண்டாவது விரல்	தர்ப்யனம்—ஜலத்தை பூமியில்விடுகிறது
மத்தியமி—மத்தியவிரல்	மமஸ்வரிய—என்னுடைய
கனிஷ்டி—நாலாவது விரல்	ஊதம்—அதிஞல்
அனாமி—ஐந்தாவது விரல்	துவாம்வசம்—உன்வசமாய்
கரதலம்—உள்ளங்கை	சித்தியார்த்தம்—பலிதமாகும்படி
திரிபுடி முச்சந்தி இடம்	திருப்தியார்த்தம்—திருப்தியாகும்படி
—மூன்றுவித சுவரூபம்	அஸ்து—அப்படியே யாகக்கூடவது
லக்ஷியம்—உள்ளோக்கம்	கெர்ப்பத்தில்—வயற்றில்

FIGURE 9.6 Part of a list giving Dravidian Tamil equivalents of Sanskrit words (Cuvāmikaḥ 1913).

be finished at seven o'clock. Then after seven o'clock up to eight o'clock recite with your tongue the worship rites to be performed mentally, while also meditating on them in your mind. After finishing this you should go to work according to your circumstances. Then, at night from seven o'clock to eight o'clock one should recite the meditations for the royal yoga (*rājayōkam*, < Skt. *rājayoga*) and the meditations for the sequence of initiation, and while doing so meditate with your mind. With this you will be finished. In this way you will receive absolute purity, happiness now and in the hereafter, the fruits of desire and dispassion, the absorption of mind, wealth, offspring, trade for one's crops, employment, the knowledge of devotion, and liberation.¹¹

Notice the sequence of times, which allows for anyone who is employed with other activities to perform the mantras along with their ritual practices, not just full-time male or female ritual specialists (i.e. *pūjārins* or *pūjāriniṣ*). Another possible indicator of a connection with a popular level is the promise that performing these rites daily will not only bring one the attainment of soteriological goals but also lead to certain tangible results (*bubhukṣu*, “desiring [this-worldly] enjoyment” instead of *mumukṣu*, “desiring liberation”): wealth, offspring, and the “trade for one’s crops” (*payir varttakam*).

Another interesting feature of Sabhapati’s vernacular instructions is his combination of physical practices, such as bathing and marking oneself with ashes, with practices of mental interiorization, such as meditative concentration. For example, among other instructions are found: (1) “Three small concentrations for the mind” (*maṇḍetiriciṇṇa tāraṇam*), (2) “Guidance on all the ceremonies, mantras, and meditations” (*carvāṇuṣṭāṇa mantira tiyāṇa upatēcam*), (3) “Guidance on the mantras for bathing” (*ṣṭāṇa mantira upatēcam*), (4) “Guidance on the mantra for the three marks of ash” (*viṣṭi tiricūrṇamantira [upatēcam]*), (5) “Guidance on the binding of the eight directions” (*aṣṭatikapantaṇa upatēcam*), (6) “Guidance on the nine celestial bodies” (*navakkiraha upatēcam*), and (7) “Guidance on (mental) formulation” (*caṅkalpa upatēcam*). It is clear from these instructions that the contents make use of an elaborate Sanskrit technical vocabulary on mental formulation (*caṅkalpam*, < Skt. *saṅkalpa*) and meditative cultivation (*pāvaṇai*, < Skt. *bhāvanā*), while their language simultaneously connects it to Tamil vernacular rituals happening all around the margins of formal temple environments.

The body of practices that Sabhapati Swami builds with these mantras moreover spans the sectarian boundaries of Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and goddess worship, and it includes a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses. These include (1) “guidance on the [mantras for] the praise for all gods” (*carvatēvatārccaṇā upatēcam*), (2) “guidance on the [mantras for] the praise of all goddesses” (*carvatēviyārccaṇā upatēcam*), (3) “guidance on the recitation of the five-syllabled mantra of the God of All” (*carvēsavar pañcākṣarajapa upatēcam*), (4) “guidance on the five-syllabled mantra of the Goddess of All” (*carvēsvari pañcākṣara upatēcam*), (5) “guidance on the five-syllabled mantra of Viṣṇu” (*viṣṇu pañcākṣara upatēcam*), (6) “guidance on the eight-syllabled mantra of Viṣṇu” (*viṣṇu aṣṭākṣara upatēcam*), (7) “guidance on the five-syllabled mantra of the great Śiva and Śakti” (*mahācivacakti pañcākṣara upatēcam*), (8) “guidance on the five-syllabled mantra of the guru” (*kuru pañcākṣara upatēcam*), (9) “guidance on the five-syllabled mantra for every god and goddess” (*sarvatēvatātēvi pañcākṣara upatēcam*), (10) “guidance on the five- and sixteen-syllabled mantra of Gaṇapati” (*kaṇapati cōṭaca pañcākṣara upatēcam*), and (11) “guidance on the six-syllabled mantra of Subrahmaṇya” (*cuppiramaṇiyar ṣaṭākṣara upatēcam*) (Cuvāmikaḷ 1913, 30). This concern to transcend various sectarian and deity-based boundaries of Hinduism was popular in South India during Sabhapati’s lifetime, and was not only promoted by the Theosophical Society in Adyar but also even earlier by Tamil Vīraśaiva authors (Steinschneider 2016) and informed by the antinomian folk legacy of the Siddhars (Zvelebil 1996).

The last connection with Tamil vernacular discourse in Sabhapati’s writings is the connection between mantra and sound. While the theoretical framework of mantras and their meditation is undoubtedly Sanskritic and elite, the application of vocalizing Tantric mantras and seed-syllables in Sabhapati’s yogic teachings helped to bridge his vernacular world with the elite temple contexts in which the Vedas and other scriptures were recited and intoned (cf. Gerety 2021). Sabhapati’s literature accordingly outlines the contours for a kind of religious, vernacular music practice that developed out of the early modern reception and performance of the musical expressions of the Tamil Siddhars, songs that to this day are held up as an exemplar of Tamil folk religious identity (Zvelebil 1973). The Siddhars, who as mentioned above were connected to the legends of Agastya, were not just *yogins* and *yoginīs* but also composers of songs that are still performed in many temple contexts today alongside the more established performances of the songs of the Vaiṣṇava Ālvars and Śaiva Nāyaṁmārs (Peterson 1989; Zvelebil 1973).

Sabhapati’s trilingual work in English, Tamil, and Sanskrit contains vivid descriptions about how each of the Tantric *cakras* or lotuses (*kamalam*, < Skt. *kamala*), which Sabhapati translated into English as “faculties,” is “created as puffing and swelling as bubbles” (Yogiswer 1890, 158). Each of these lotuses corresponds to what Sabhapati calls “Divine words” (*pījamantiram*, < Skt. *bīja-mantra*, lit. “seed-mantras” or “seed-spells”). For example, there are five such words (or “seed-syllables”) in the case of the “Kundali [Skt. *kuṇḍali*] of elements or Mooladharum [*mūlādhāra*].” Each of these words has what Sabhapati translates as “Spirit” (*tēvatamsam*, < Skt. *devatāṁśa*, lit. “part of a deity”), which dwells in what he calls a “bubble” (an idiosyncratic translation of *kamala*, lit. “lotus”): the “Spirit of the syllable *om*” creates ether in the center, and the “spirits” of *va*, *ca*, *śa*, and *sa*, respectively, create air, fire, water, and “mud” (i.e. earth). These words create five faculties (*tattvas*) that accordingly contain “sins, vices, impurities and unholiness” which “must be purified by silent and dumb meditation” (*maunajapatīyāṇam*, < Skt. *maunajapadhyāna*, lit. “meditation of silent [mantra]-recitation”). The impurities of these faculties arise on account of *māyā*, what Sabhapati translates as “delusion,” analogized with “impure water.” The “pure water,” by contrast, is the divine word or seed-spell of each Spirit that, when daily recited by the practitioner, can wash away the impurity and cause the *tattva* to eventually be re-absorbed into the transcendent Śiva.

Sabhapati’s hagiographies mention he was celebrated during his lifetime as a Tamil poet, and his works include lyrical songs and poetic compositions; it is no surprise that the aforementioned practices on mantric seed-syllables were not just a cosmological abstraction but also linked to the theory and practice of intoning musical *svaras* or “tones.” The mantras are linked to phonetic sounds that comprise lyrical music. The student is instructed to think beyond the bliss that arises from singing musical lyrics and to meditate on the sounds from which these lyrics are molded, the theory of which somewhat resonates with the *Saṅgītaratnākāra* of Śārṅgadeva (Kitada and Śārṅgadeva 2012). These tones in turn correspond to cosmogonic “inherent natures” (*svarūpam* or *cuvarūpam*, < Skt. *svarūpa*) invoked

using sounds. The vowels (*svara*) are the starting point of the practice, which then develops to include the labial and nasal humming associated with syllables like *am*, *nam*, *oṃ*, and *ram*. This then gives way to the “bliss” of *na*, *ma*, *ci*, *va*, *ṛa* (< Skt. *namo śivāya*), or the Śaiva five-syllabled mantra (Skt. *pañcākṣaramantra*), which are then all integrated in the *praṇava* or syllable Om.¹² We return finally to the “gamut of the Vedas” (*vedasvara*), which are what Sabhapati calls “Spiritual sounds” (*praṇavasvarasaptalaya saṅkītam*, < Skt. *praṇavasvarasaptalaya saṅgīta*, lit. “music of the seven-fold absorption in the sounds of the syllable Om”). This seven-fold absorption in sound (Mpv. *saptalayam*) are the seven *svaras* plus their octaval resolution (Mpv. *ca*, *ri*, *ka*, *ma*, *pa*, *ta*, *nī*, *ca*, < Skt. *sa*, *ri*, *gā*, *ma*, *pā*, *dhā*, *nī*, *śa*), the notes of which form the basis for musical improvisation in Indian modes or *rāgas*, including the Tamil vernacular songs of the *Tēvāram* and those of the Tamil Siddhars.

As Primiano concluded in his survey of the importance of vernacular religion and folklore, research need not be limited to consideration “not only about *how* and *what* people have said, sung, or expressed religiously, but about the substance and objects of those beliefs in themselves whether natural or supernatural” (1995, 52). To this point, I would add that, in this case, it is not even just about “beliefs” but also ritual practices that lead to living dispositions and ways of perceiving the world. Further analyzing the expressions and rites of Tamil vernacular religion as expressed by an author like Sabhapati Swami, his predecessors, and his followers, can provide a critical window into these dispositions and show the diversity of teachings even among published authors on yoga in the modern period.

Notes

- 1 In this and subsequent references to technical terms, I will first give the Tamil transliteration according to standard diacritical practice, followed by a transliteration from Sanskrit when applicable.
- 2 For various ways in which scholars have framed the contours of this group, some more convincing than others, see R. Venkatraman (1990), Zvelebil (1996), Weiss (2009), Mallinson (2019), and Ezhilraman (2015). For consideration of their place in the wider pan-Indian context of the Siddhas, see White (1996) and Linrothe et al. (2006).
- 3 “Chaturthi” (*caturtthi*, < Skt. *caturthī*) is the fourth day of a lunar fortnight after a new or full moon.
- 4 The festival of Dol Purnima (Bng. *dol pūrṇimā*)/Dol Yatra (Hnd. *dol jātrā*) is sometimes celebrated with a swinging palanquin.
- 5 “Sasthi” (Mpv. *caṣṭhi*, < Skt. *ṣaṣṭhī*) is the sixth day of a lunar fortnight after a new or full moon. It can also refer to the name of an important childbirth goddess who is honored on the sixth day of the lunar month, and the sixth day after childbirth.
- 6 See White (2006, 40–34) for more on this observance.
- 7 The five actions are *as*—“creation” (*cīruṣṭi*, < Skt. *śṛṣṭi*), “maintenance” (*titi*, < Skt. *sthiti*), “destruction” (*caṅkāram*, < Skt. *saṃhāra*), “the darkening of the soul by the deity” (*tīropavam*, < Skt. *tīrobhava*, lit. “disappearance,” “vanishing”), and “favor” (*aṇukkīrahaṃ*, < Skt. *anugraha*).

- 8 For the history of various “Agastyas” in Tamil literature, see Appendix 3 of Zvelebil 1992.
- 9 *kēṭṭirulakīr kēṭṭaikkēṭuttu kēṭilā muktikaival liyantarum māḷāta yakastiyaruṣi mākuṭṭa tōpatēcamāvētarahasciyōṇmaiyaī yālāveṇaiyāṇṭa yarut civakñāṇa pōtaruṣiyēṇak karuḷiyavāṭē nālāyuraittēṇ nāṇuñ caṇkīrahavēṭōpatēcamāyulakuyyavē.*
- 10 *vilvavaṇattil ātiyil akasttiyar vātāpi, vilvāpiyacurāl aikkoṇṇu akasttiyāralayamum, akasttiya tīrt-tamum stāpittu ipperēri ye:ṇpatil yākakunṭam erpaṭutti yākañceytupōṇa tīrukkoṇṇūrirkuvantu pēvērikku yaṭutta nilattil niṣṭaiyilirukkumpoḷuthu taṇ tirikāla ṇāṇatiruṣṭiyil, tāṇ niṣṭaiyiliruk-kumiṭam akasttiyarūṣi koṇcakālam maṭālayayācīrmam erpaṭutti, vacittupōṇayitāmāyūm, pēvēri avar yākañceytayākakunṭamāyūm inta yākakunṭavaṭapurānilattil akasttiyarukku carvēsvarar taṇ paṇcakiruttiya naṭaṇa taricaṇam koṭuttatāyūm, 1008 liṇkaṇkaḷ ai 108 cālikkirāmaṇkaḷ ai taṇ ciṣyarkaḷ pūjittu pōṇatāyūm.*
- 11 *inta upatēca kuṟippinpaṭi tiyāṇam paṇṇavēṇṭiyak kiramam kālaiyil sṇāṇamantirattaiccolli āṇaṇceytu or taṇiyiṭattiluḷkāṇtu nittiyakkīramayaṇuṣṭāṇa vitikaḷ ai vāyīṇāl vācittukkoṇṭē appoḷutē maṇatiṇāluntiyāṇittukkoṇṭē kālaiyil (6) maṇimutal (7) maṇikkulḷāka ceytu muṭit-tuviṭṭu appoḷutē (7) maṇikkumēl (8) maṇikkulḷāka māṇacakiriyāpūjaikaḷaiyūm vākkāl vācittukkoṇṭē maṇatiṇāl tiyāṇittukkoṇṭē ceytu muṭittuviṭṭup pirakuyavāl avāl toliluk kuppōka-vum. irāṭtiri (7) maṇimutal (8) maṇikkulḷāka rājayōkat tiyāṇaṇkaḷaiyūm, tīkṣākkīramatti-yāṇaṇkaḷaiyūm, vācittukkoṇṭē maṇatāl tiyāṇittukkoṇṭē ceytu muṭikkavum. itaṇāl carvacutti, ihaparacukam kāmyiṇa niṣkāmmiyapalaṇ, maṇōḷḷayam, taṇam, cantāṇam, payir varittakam, uttiyōkam, paktikñāṇam muktikkēṭaikkum.*
- 12 For a dated but useful translation of Tamil verses pertaining to these syllables, see Pope (1900, xxxix–xlii). For more analysis of the mantra in Tamil Śaiva-specific contexts, see Winch (1975, 72–75). For other contexts in which Om is linked to sound and yoga, see Gerety (2021).

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